

FREEZING TO DEATH!

BY WILLIAM IVORY IRVINE.

How Jennings Held the Fort in a Blizzard, and How the Chief Despatcher Held Jennings.



FOR fourteen hours the storm had blown the white flakes against the little station at Wimmer Summitt until nothing else could be seen but the little weather-worn red building.

Jennings, the relief operator, opened the door and looked vainly for a break in the heavy clouds, but nothing could be seen but the snow. His relief was now two hours overdue and the chances for his arrival were very slim.

Cursing the weather, he slammed the door and walked to the little stove which was making a brave effort to warm the bare interior. It was pretty hard lines to be stuck in such a hole all right, he mused, pulling the chair up to the stove, but tough lines were the rule of the relief operators on the Erie and Wyoming Valley Railroad.

Wimmer Summitt was known as the hole of the little coal road which climbed one side of Eagle Top Mountain and went down the other. No one ever called there, and it was the only thing that ever had been built on the top of the mountain with the exception of the tracks. It was nothing but a shanty, used as a reporting station, and the only people the agent ever saw were the train crews.

It takes more than a snow-storm and a dreary station to dampen the spirits of a nineteen-year-old telegrapher, surcharged with the desire to make his mark on the line, and, after piling more coal on the stove, Jennings ate part of the lunch he had left from his noonday meal and busied himself with the time schedule.

The latter proved to be very complicated, owing to delays caused by huge snow-banks on the tracks, and it was long after midnight when he had finished.

The stove had long since forsaken its warmth and it was some time before Jennings stirred himself and built a new fire.

The solemnity of the atmosphere was disturbed only by the continuous click of the telegraph machine. At dawn Jennings arose from his desk, stiff and sore from his long sitting, and looked out of the window.

The snow was falling just as steadily, and showed no signs of abating. The wind had increased in velocity and the drifts were plainly visible on the top of the track. The agent was fairly chilled as he looked on these banks and thought of the chances for his relief to surmount that mountain.

There was not an engine on the road which was capable of pushing up that high grade through those drifts. If an engine could not get up he would have to stay there until the storm ceased, and, from the way the wind was now blowing, it looked as though he would be held there until the end of the storm.

The supplies for living were slim. He had nothing eatable except a remnant of yesterday's meal, a small box of biscuits, and two cans of sardines left him by Mason, the regular operator.

He was nearly famished and would have to use the best part of his meager eatables to satisfy the pangs of present hunger. For the first time he realized the seriousness of his position, and drawing a jack-knife from his pocket he reluctantly opened one of the cans.

Should he eat this now, or should he save it? Hunger cried, "Now," but reason called him to look to the future.

Jennings halted in the midst of his undertaking and proceeded to reason the situation as it appealed to his innermost thought. Yes, he would have to divide these morsels of food into at least six meals.

Could he do it? For a long while he stood with a half-opened can clutched tightly in his hand, the sharp edges of the metal cutting his skin. Then, as if his mind had grasped the situation, he slowly wiped the knife on his trousers leg and dropped it into his pocket.

His resolution had no more than been formed when the little instrument on the desk started to sputter his call:

"Ws—Ws—Ws—Co. Ws—Ws—Ws—Co."

The operator dropped into his chair, opened the lever, and gave the signal to go ahead.

"This is Nather," the sounder clicked under the chief train despatcher's steady sending. "I can't get a relief up before to-night; we are all tied up. Can you hold on?"

"If you can't get one up before to-night, I guess I'll have to," clicked back Jennings. "I'm short on meals and will have to come up pretty close if I am going to see it through," he added.

"Do the best you can and keep a stiff grip on things and keep awake. If you go to sleep in that shanty, you will freeze to death before night. Will call

you later and let you know how things are coming along," answered Nather.

The sounder was silent. Now he would have to stretch his supplies as he had expected. There was no other way.

He heated a can of water, and with a couple of biscuits and part of the sardines he made his breakfast. For the first time he began to feel sleepy, and calling to Glenside, he asked the agent to answer his call if he was wanted. Putting on his overcoat he opened the door and stepped out in the snow.

The first blast of the northeaster knocked all thoughts of sleep out of him and he started down the track to fill the signal-lamp at the switch a quarter of a mile away. His



YES, THERE WAS THE LAMP.



progress was slow. The snow blew steadily into his face, making it difficult to catch his breath.

The walking was bad, and by the time he had reached the lamp he was well-nigh exhausted from his exertions. Jennings wished for the station and its little stove as he struggled with the wind to fill the lamp.

His task finished, he started on the return journey. It seemed now as if the distance was longer than the down trip. His feet felt heavy and his steps lost their long stride and now dragged. Twice he stumbled over a hidden tie, but he kept his feet, and, after what seemed hours, he threw open the door of the station and stumbled in. The little station was glowing with friendly warmth and he was glad to pull off his wet coat and gloves and sit down in front of the fire.

If he could only take a little nap, how much better he would feel. But no; sleep was out of the question. Wasn't that what Nather had told him not to do? No, he would not sleep. Angry with the thought that he would sleep on

the job, Jennings walked across the room and dropped heavily into his chair and called Glenside to send his car reports.

Routine work kept him busy until evening and then he started to eat his meager supper. Oh, but he was hungry. Hadn't he gone without his dinner, just to have a good supper?

He would have a half decent meal and then he would go and light the signal-lamp. The cracker did not taste hard now, and sardines never had such a flavor before. He would like to eat more, but that was impossible; he must save some.

Suppose Nather could not get his relief up? But what was the use of looking at it that way? Nather would do his best, that was something. The chief dispatcher liked him and would not forget him, high up on top of the wind-swept mountain, snowed in and short of food.

He would go and fix the lamp now; wouldn't like Nather to think that he had forgotten to do his duty, he thought, as he put the last cracker that he had allowed himself into the hot water. But

it was terrible outside; he could hear the wind blowing, causing the wires to vibrate as he wrapped a paper around his remaining biscuits. He picked up the oil-can and swung it over his arm, his mind made up, opened the door and stepped outside.

The snow was not falling so much, he thought, as he walked down the icy ties, but the wind was blowing hard; yes, harder than before. He must be getting near the place, he was sure he had walked the required distance. Yes, there was the lamp.

Slowly and painfully he unscrewed the lamp. It was full. He gave a feeble laugh as he remembered that he had taken care of it in the morning. There hadn't been any use in his carrying the oil-can all the way down. He would leave it there.

Using his body as a shield against the wind, he lit the lamp. He felt better now since he had fixed the lamp, he would not have to bother with it again for a long while, but he must get back to the station. He remembered that the coal-box was empty, and that he would have to fill it from the bin at the back of the station.

The thought of the warm stove stirred his footsteps and he started on his return. He would go back and fill the stove with coal, and in case the train did not get through he would ask to be relieved from watching and he would go to sleep.

Jennings succeeded in getting back, and, without taking off his coat, picked up the coal-buckets and started for the coal-bin. At least he would have a good fire until it was time for the train.

He lifted the lid of the bin and—*there was no coal!* The lid fell from his hand with a crash which was lost in the roar of the wind. Something must be wrong with his eyes.

Orders were orders, and they were long-standing ones with the E. and W. V. that all bins, at all times, be kept full. Could the man on day duty have forgotten to order coal? It did not seem possible, but there was no coal in the bin.

For a long while Jennings stood as one dazed, unmindful of the wind which was howling and echoing down the long

corridors of darkness. His one hope had gone.

Mechanically he picked up the buckets and walked back to the station. At the door he stopped and gazed down the track. Below, he could see the little signal-light throwing its ray into the darkness. He laughed now as he thought of his earlier struggles.

The stove was still giving a most delightful warmth. He would at least get the benefit of it. But first he was going to tell Nather a thing or two. Throwing his coat and gloves on the little bench running around the wall, he walked quickly to his desk where the little piece of metal was clicking. Sleep was forgotten now in his newly aroused anger, and, pulling back the lever, he silenced the instrument.

"Co—Co—Co—Ws," he ticked.

After a short delay the "Ws here," sounded.

"Is Nather there?" Jennings clicked, dropping into his chair.

"Wait a minute," the instrument answered.

"Never can get anything or anybody when you want them," Jennings muttered, as he waited impatiently.

"What do you want?" sounded the ticker.

Jennings recognized Nather's sending and throwing open the lever, asked:

"What is the matter with you people? Here I am storm-stuck in this God-forsaken hole without a pound of coal."

"What?"

Nather's question came over the wire with such a rush that Jennings could almost see the man shouting at him. One could always recognize the personality of the man when Nather got on the wire.

"There is not a pound of coal here," Jennings repeated, "and my fire won't last more than a half-hour."

"Why, I thought there was enough coal to last forty-eight hours longer," Nather was now sending like he talked when excited. The words came piling in on top of each other with barely a pause between them. The wire fairly burned with his indignation.

"Did that fool let his supply run down like that?" he asked, and then

waited a moment as though to explain his position and then started to telegraph rapidly:

"He ought to be tarred and feathered. We received his order just before you took charge and supposed that he had some left and were sending some up in regular order."

As Jennings listened to the explanation, his anger cooled and he thought with pity what would happen to Mason. Nather was a strict disciplinarian, and when his orders were broken his answer was an order to call at the office and get your time.

It was too bad that Mason would lose his job. He was a good fellow, not much older than himself and had a fine woman and kid.

What would he do for a job? He was not strong enough to go into the mines. The line was the only thing that he could do. These thoughts passed through his mind, and quickly opening the line he answered:

"Look here, sir. Don't blame the poor fellow. He is up to his neck in trouble, and of course he didn't know that this confounded blizzard was going to set in. He knew that if his coal did not hold out he could get enough from the trains to last until it did come."

"We will have to take up his case later," Nather answered. "The thing that has got me going is that you have not got any coal. But don't worry," he added, "the snow has stopped and we are sending a plow up on both sides and they ought to reach you before the night is over. Have you taken care of the light?"

"Yes," answered Jennings.

"Well, for God's sake, don't go to sleep."

The sounder stopped. Jennings felt better now. Nather's assurance that relief would soon be there cheered him, and with a more hopeful view of the situation, he arose from his chair and walked over to the stove and threw open the door.

How much longer would it hold out? Fifteen minutes, maybe half an hour; no more! It was impossible to think longer than that short thirty minutes. The fire seemed to understand that it could not live much longer and was put-

ting up a brave show, but around the edges the dead ashes were already showing, and to Jennings's mind, the struggle to keep itself alive reminded him of a dying man who understood just how much longer he would exist.

The little red flames seemed to call to him to help them out, but how could he? The bin was empty. He felt that it was impossible to look at the struggle and not do something.

The flames, to him, were not the offspring of a heap of coals; they were human beings like himself, trying to keep awake when it was impossible. Nather's advice was forgotten. He would sit down and go to sleep with the flames.

Yes, that would be better. He wanted sleep. Why shouldn't he? It was too much to ask a man to stay awake as long as he had; the train would not get up for hours yet. He would be awake to meet them and then he could get more coal and start new life in the fire. But, how was he going to keep it alive until the train came? Maybe he could find some wood.

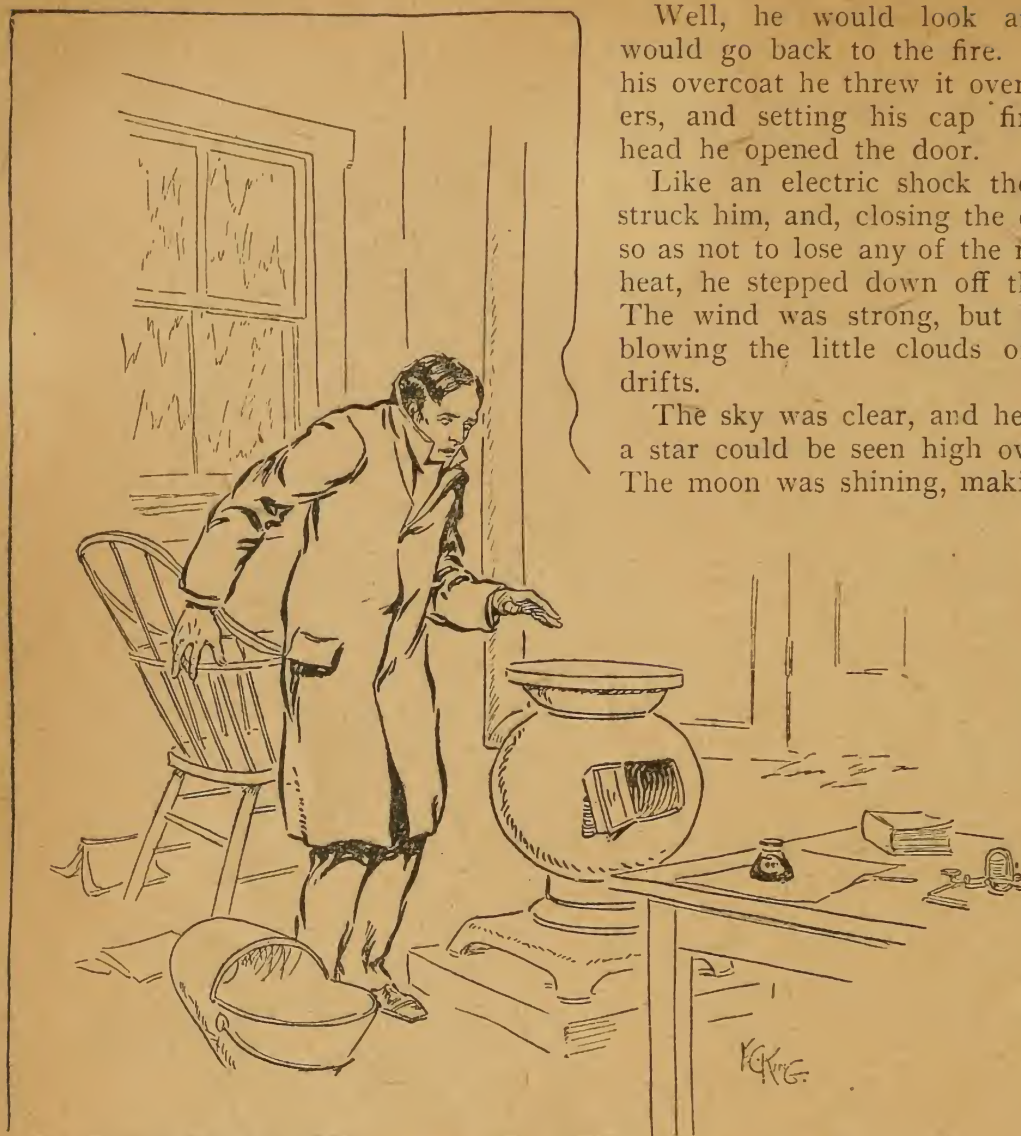
Jennings aroused himself with a start and looked around the room. He must have been dozing. He did not remember sitting down. The fire was giving up the fight and nothing remained but the little red spot in the center, just like the heart of a man, the last thing to give up. His eyes wandered around the room until they stopped before the little coal-box. Why hadn't he used that before? That would help the fire.

It was the work of but a few minutes to reduce this to kindling and place it on the fire. Like the patient who is nearly dead when oxygen is applied, the fire started to crack softly and in a few minutes it was burning cheerily, feeding itself on the wood as though afraid it would be taken away before it could finish. Jennings watched the red flames shooting in and out of the kindling and then slowly sat down.

"Ws—Ws—Ws—Co. Ws—Ws—Ws—Co."

Again and again the telegraph instrument gave the call, each time more insistent.

Jennings raised his head with a start and listened. The call was repeated.



THE STOVE WAS LIKE A PIECE OF ICE.

Well, he would look and then he would go back to the fire. Picking up his overcoat he threw it over his shoulders, and setting his cap firmly on his head he opened the door.

Like an electric shock the cold wind struck him, and, closing the door quickly so as not to lose any of the now precious heat, he stepped down off the platform. The wind was strong, but had stopped blowing the little clouds of snow into drifts.

The sky was clear, and here and there a star could be seen high over his head. The moon was shining, making it nearly

Yes, somebody at Colesdale wanted to speak with him.

Why didn't they let him alone, he mumbled sleepily, rising and slowly crossing the room. Pushing back the lever he stopped the call, and when the line was closed at the other end he sent his O. K. After a short space the sounder started to work.

"Go out and see if that signal-lamp is lit," it said. "This is Nather, and I have a plow coming up on both sides. You flag 87 up from Glenside and hold it until 29 gets there and then call for orders."

Jennings repeated the order and then sent his O. K. and closed the wire.

"Certainly the light is set red," he muttered, entering the order in the book. "Why should Nather want to chase me out in the cold?"

as light as day. He could see the lamp, which looked like a ruby lying on a cloth of white, shining brightly, down the tracks. Now that he had obeyed Nather's order, there was little use in standing in the cold, 29 or 87 would not be up for an hour anyway, and he would go back and take care of the fire.

It felt good to be inside again, he thought, closing the door. He could take a rest now without disobedience. After placing more wood on the fire he dropped into the chair with the overcoat still around his shoulders.

His eyes closed and he pushed his legs out, one on either side of the stove. Oh, but it felt good to close his eyes and stretch out after his long days and night.

Nothing could be heard in the room but the soft cracking of the fire. Slowly, Jennings's head began to nod, his shoul-

ders hunched and he was rapidly losing all thoughts of his surroundings.

Then the sounder of the telegraph on the desk began to work. It kept sending the same, "Ws—Ws—Co—Ws—Co." Colesdale wanted Wimmer Summitt. Again and again he sent the call, each time more sharply.

The operator lifted his head with a start. That sounded like his call. For a full minute, as though his tired brain refused to work, he listened, his head to one side as if to hear better. The dots and dashes were clearer now; they no longer crowded one another and he could plainly hear now, "Ws—Ws—Co." Yes, that was Ws, and Colesdale was calling.

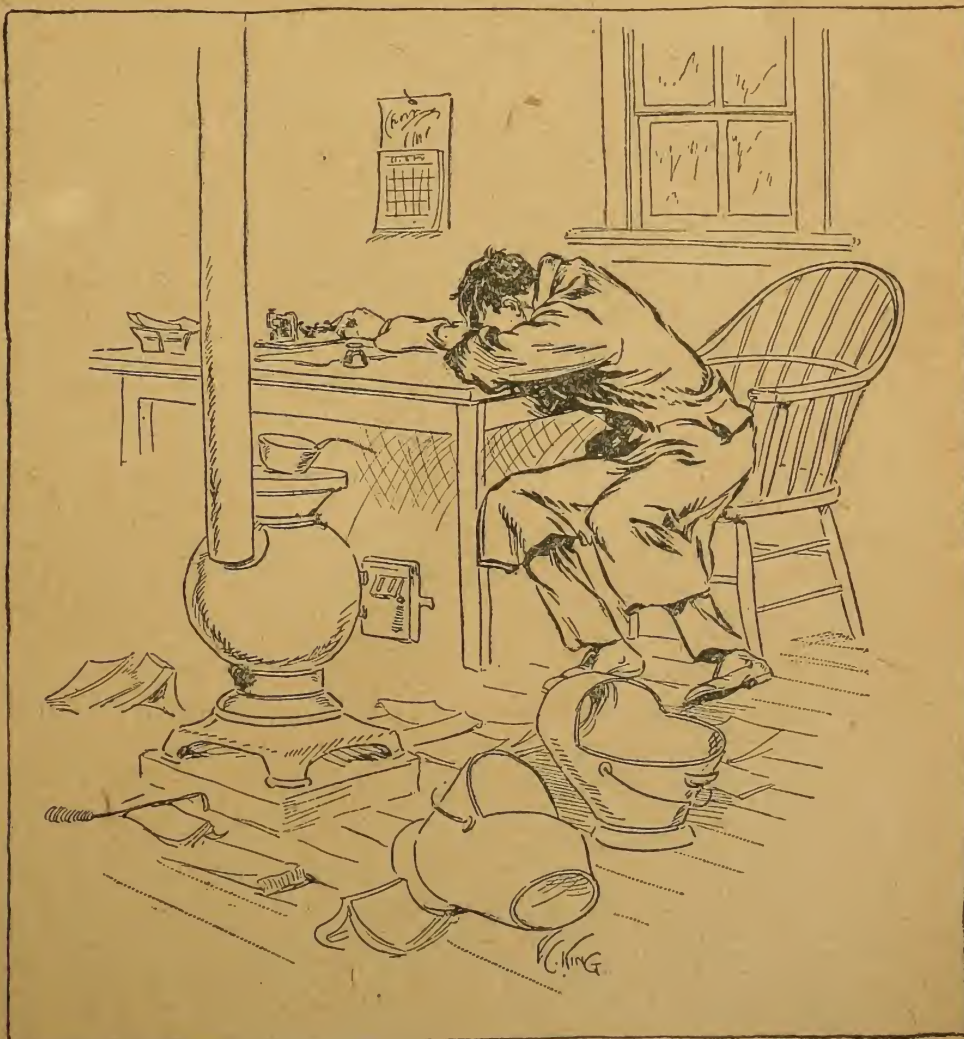
The telegrapher's instinct pulled him to his feet and, like one blind, he placed his arms out and walked slowly to his desk? Why didn't they wait a minute? He heard them. There was no use

breaking their arms sending his call. Hadn't he always answered when he was called? Some people made him tired; they were always in a rush when there wasn't any cause. These thoughts filled his head as he dropped into his chair, leaned over the desk and opened the lever and, slowly, as if to impress his caller that he was taking care of his work, he sent:

"Ws—O. K.—Co."

"Nather on the wire," the instrument ticked. "Go out and see if that light is all right. I don't want any smash-up."

"All right," Jennings answered and closed the key. What the deuce was the matter with Nather to ask him to go out again. He had never before repeated an order, why should he now? It must be that he was worried with the work of getting the road open. His feet felt like lead as he dragged them slowly to the door and opened it.



HE HAD ALREADY FORGOTTEN WHAT HAD BEEN SAID AGAINST HIM.

"Of course the light is lit," he said aloud, speaking to the air. "I can see it plainly. All rot, this going outside. I won't go again. There was enough oil in the lamp to last until morning; I saw to that when I lit it."

Jennings stepped inside and closed the door and then walked to the stove. It had burned all the wood and once more was going out. What could he feed it with just to keep it alive for a few minutes? He looked around the room, but excepting the table which held the instruments and the books, there was nothing in the room but the two chairs.

His eyes traveled slowly over the table, but there was nothing to burn but the books. No, he could not use them, but he could use the cardboard backs. They would burn just like wood and throw out a good heat.

Filled with this new thought he tore the backs off, and after tearing them in halves, threw them on the fire and closed the door. Almost immediately the fire burst into flames and threw out a terrific heat. From his chair, Jennings could see the flames through the cracks roaring up the chimney. He watched them, fascinated.

Now the flames did not show so much and the roar ceased. He watched the fire die almost as quickly as it had started, and, throwing open the little door, he watched the remaining pieces of glowing cardboard curl up and then fall back, white and dead.

It was all over now. There was no red glow to keep him company. His last friend had left him, and all that remained was a few whitened ashes.

He looked around the room. It was beginning to lose its look of warmth already. In the corners he could see the cracks here and there which had been opened by the wind and weather. Already the wind which had fought so long to get in was whistling through, and it seemed to the agent that it was trying to call his attention to its victory after the long fight.

With a shudder, Jennings took his overcoat from his shoulders, where it had been hanging loosely, and put it on, buttoning it tightly from the neck down. Then he sat down in front of the stove so as to get what little heat remained.

It had been a long fight for him, but it was ended now. If he could go to sleep he would not feel so cold.

"Ws—Ws—Ws—Co."

Again and again the call rang out through the room. Jennings turned his head and watched the little brass hammer as it pounded out the call. What was wanted now? It surely could not be Nather again; he would be too busy to call him.

Some fool at Colesdale who would ask him something which they could find out if they'd look at the books! No, he would not pay any attention to it. Let them think that he was outside looking after that lamp.

The sounder was working furiously. It seemed to him like a man who spoke and did not get an answer, and then called louder each time. It also seemed as though somebody was shouting into his ears.

The walls called; even the wind coming through the cracks stopped and listened and then started to call to him to answer. He moved his already stiff body and turned his back to the table.

Let them keep on calling; they would get tired after awhile and would stop. But, what would happen then? He would get his time. He didn't care. He hoped that he would never see the inside of a signal-station again.

He had had enough. He was big enough now to go into the mines. It was never cold there, and there was always somebody near, even if it was only one of the little blind mine mules. There would not be any fiendish pieces of brass calling him every few minutes like it was doing now. Why didn't they stop? He would make them, and he would tell that operator a thing or two.

Gathering his numbed legs, he stood up. God, but it was cold! He dropped his hand on the top of the stove and quickly pulled it away. The stove was like a piece of ice!

He leaned against the chair and sleepily looked at the telegraph. It seemed bigger now. The sounding bar was almost as big as his arm and was going up and down like a connecting-rod of an engine, tireless, always doing its work when the power was put on.

Its ceaseless movement fascinated him.



I GUESS 87 DID NOT GET YOU ANY TOO SOON."

he could not watch it any longer. He must stop it or it would send him mad.

The noise was terrific. With a hoarse cry he stumbled across the room and fell into the chair. His right hand dragged slowly out of his pocket until it rested on the black-headed lever and threw it open.

Instantly the pounding stopped. His fingers slowly moved over to the key and rested there, stiff and cold. How long they lay there he did not know, and then, like a beginner, he started to work them slowly and awkwardly and spelled:

"Ws—O. K.," and after a long pause, "Co."

Slowly his fingers left the key and moved over to the table until they rested on the lever and closed it. The key was hardly closed when the sounder started.

"Where have you been? A train could go to Hades before you would answer," it said. "Go out and see if that signal is set all right to flag 87."

"I have just been out," Jennings answered slowly. "It is all right."

"But I want you to go out again," Nather replied.

After a long wait and not receiving any answer he called:

"Go ahead, Charlie. I am all upset to-night and I am afraid something might happen. I will wait at the wire."

Jennings raised himself from his cramped position and, with a shudder, walked to the door and looked out. Yes, it was set all right. Now he would tell Nather and he would not go out again.

He closed the door and looked at the station clock. It was stopped. It must be getting toward morning. What was the matter with his arms and legs?

Thousands of pins and needles seemed to be stuck in them, which hurt him every time he took a step. What was the cause of all those sharp pains? It was with difficulty that he reached his chair and opened the lever.

"It's all right. Is the train coming up?" he telegraphed, and after a few minutes, looking at the silent sounder, he sent:

"I'm cold and tired; I don't feel hungry now."

The key was closed and then Nather started, quickly, to inspire confidence:

"Yes, it will get there soon. Keep your nerve and your relief will be there before you know it."

Jennings heard but faintly, his face was buried in his arms, which were lying on the table. His cap had fallen off and rolled to the floor, forgotten. It was impossible to keep awake longer, but why was Nather calling him again? He had fixed the light. What was he saying? He lifted his head slightly and peered forward. His eyes, heavy with sleep, refused to fully obey him and would only open part way.

"Jennings, Jennings, for God's sake, answer me," the instrument was ticking. Yes, he could hear now, but why was it so far away? Now, what was it saying?

"You dead, or are you too darned lazy to answer me—sneak—trying to throw me down when I'm up to my neck in work. Well—"

As if shot, Jennings sat up and opened the key. The line was barely closed when he started to operate. He did not feel so stiff that he could not defend himself, and he threw his words over the wire, hot and direct.

"You're a nice one to call me a sneak, ain't you? Lazy, am I? Trying to throw you down, am I? Well, when I meet you, I'll show you. It's all right for you, in a warm place, to keep asking a man to go outside and look after a light and a train that never comes.

"I was told that you would do me if you ever had a chance, and did not believe it. I knocked the man down who told me. But he was right. You have no more feeling than a dog.

"Don't open that lever. You listen till I'm finished, and it won't be long. You've kept me up here for God knows how long—I've forgotten—and then tormented me by asking me to go outside. I won't go!"

He closed the key and fell back exhausted from his exertions. Nather was good and mad now, he could tell from the way he was sending. It was no longer the even steady roll that he generally sent. The dots and dashes were hardly distinguishable and the words seemed to be running together. The sending was of a man excited, angry. What was he saying now? Jennings listened.

"Talk to me like that, you cub; well, I'll show you. I'll get rid of you so fast that you'll wish you had never seen the E. and W. V. I wouldn't have a man like you on the road, you young bully."

Jennings nodded his head as though agreeing with him. He had already forgotten what had been said against him. His head fell into his arms. He was too tired to bother now. Just let the C. D. wait until he had some sleep and wasn't so cold. He could catch a word of abuse now and then from the many that came over the wire, but the rest was a continuous flow of dots and dashes, dying away until he heard nothing.

With a start he sat up and looked around. Everything was changed. He was no longer in that little shanty of a station at Wimmer Summitt. It was a bedroom. He looked down and saw he was in bed. How did he get there? Unable to understand, he dropped back on the pillows and closed his eyes.

For a long while he lay there, trying to remember. Then he heard a door open quietly and some one step into the room and close the door.

He looked up. Nather stood there.

"Hallo, Charlie!" he said, and sat down on the bed. "Feel better?"

Jennings could not answer and for a long while he looked into the train despatcher's smiling face. Nather said:

"You've had a pretty rough shift, my boy, and I guess 87 did not get you any too soon. But you'll soon be all right, and can go to a station of your own now. You've won your spurs and I hope you'll forgive me for those names I called you. Won't you?"

"I had to keep you awake until 87 could get you; there was no other train coming up and the light was not necessary; that was to keep you on your feet, and when I found that the light would not hold you, I called you things which I knew you were man enough to resent. Forget the names, old man, won't you?"

Jennings raised himself on his elbow and looking into Nather's face, asked:

"How 'bout my time; did you mean that?"

Nather shook his head and then Jennings held out his hand.

"You're white!" he said.